

## Fun Facts Friday: Identifying Elephant Bonds

Social bonding refers to the formation of strong social connections between individuals. In humans, we often describe these bonds in emotional terms such as trust, comfort, and attachment. Because scientists cannot directly measure emotions in animals, they identify social bonds through behavioral observation.

In elephants, researchers look for repeated interactions between the same individuals. Affiliative behaviors, meaning friendly social interactions such as trunk touching, trunk-to-mouth contact, and other gentle contact with a companion's face or body, are key indicators of social bonds. Scientists also measure association frequency, how much time elephants spend near one another, and whether they move in synchrony, walking in parallel, feeding side by side, or resting together. When these patterns occur over time, they can determine whether a relationship is strong, weak, or temporary.

Scientists study elephant relationships as dyads, examining pairs individually before looking at the group as a whole. In a trio like ours at the Refuge, this means three possible dyads: Tarra and Bo, Tarra and Mundi, and Bo and Mundi. Together, they illustrate how elephants can bond both within individual dyads and as a cohesive social group.

**Photo: Bo, Tarra, and Mundi bonded as pairs and as a trio.**



